

# STAGETOSTAGE

The Theatrical Work of Robert Cohen





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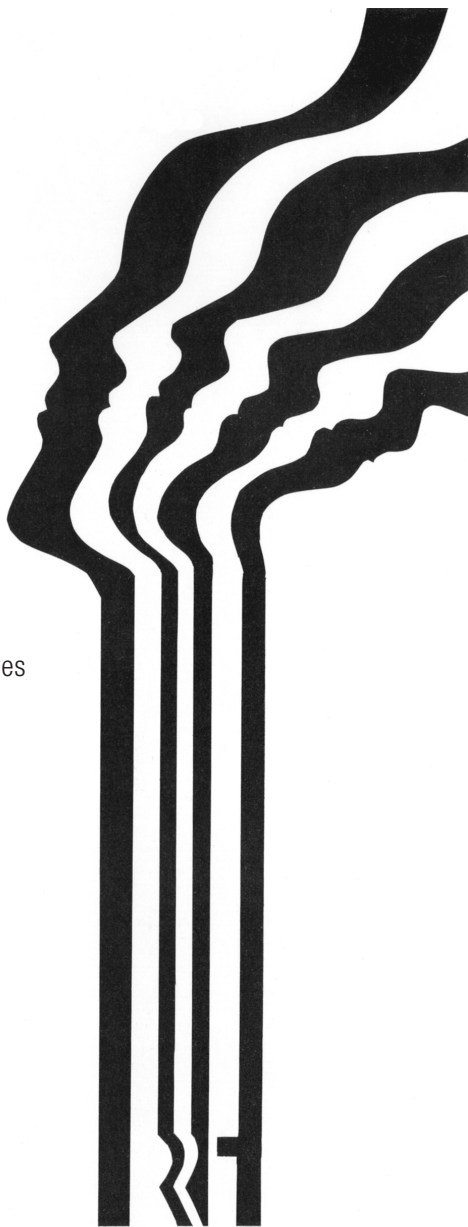
The Theatrical Work of Robert Cohen

An exhibit in the  
UC Irvine Langson Library  
Muriel Ansley Reynolds Exhibit Gallery

April 2008 - November 2008

Curated by

Jackie Dooley  
Head of Special Collections and Archives



On cover:

Ansel Adams, photographer. Robert Cohen directing a drama rehearsal in UCI's Aldrich Park, 1966. Contemporary print from original negative by Ansel Adams, UCR/California Museum of Photography, Sweeney/Rubin Ansel Adams FIAT LUX Collection, University of California, Riverside.

# Foreword

Welcome to the UCI Libraries' spring 2008 exhibit, *Stage to Stage: The Theatrical Work of Robert Cohen*. The exhibit was inspired by Professor Cohen's recent donation of his collection of production books in which he meticulously gathered materials documenting the stage productions he has directed since launching his professional directorial career at UCI in 1966.

As Claire Trevor Professor of Drama in the School of the Arts, Professor Cohen is one of UCI's most notable and publicly visible founding faculty members. Since arriving for UCI's first year of classes in 1965, he has directed more than 70 productions on campus and 30 on the professional stage, published 12 books on acting and theatre, written new plays, translated classic ones, and taught the art of acting to innumerable students. In 1993 he was honored with the UCI Medal, the campus's highest honor, and in 1999 he received the Career Achievement Award from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

The opening program on April 29th featured Professor Cohen in conversation about UCI drama with Professor Eli Simon, Chair of the Drama Department, who acknowledges his colleague's continuing role as the department's guiding light.

I hope you find the visual documentation of Professor Cohen's career in *Stage to Stage* a delightful overview of his productions of some of the world's great theatrical works, possibly bringing back memories of sitting in the Claire Trevor Theatre or elsewhere on campus watching UCI student actors bring life to their director's creative works.

On behalf of both the Partners of the UCI Libraries and the entire library staff, we welcome you to this exhibit and invite you to return to view others in the future.

Gerald J. Munoff  
University Librarian



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## The Theatrical Work of Robert Cohen

*“The job of a director, in the main, is to preside over certain translations. Translations, for example, from the written to the spoken word, from the general to the specific stage direction ... These translations, taken in sum, transform a literary document (words on paper) to a theatrical presentation (actors on a stage). The translations accomplished, the director—not himself a participant in the production—goes home, his catalytic operation completed.”*

—Robert Cohen, 1985

He is a director. A teacher. An author. A playwright. A translator. A dramatic critic. A scholar. He began life in the theatre acting in high school and directing plays at summer camp.

Robert Cohen, Claire Trevor Professor of Drama in the School of the Arts, is a member of UCI’s founding faculty, and one of only a few who remain active 43 years later. Since arriving in advance of the first year of classes in 1965, he has directed more than 70 productions on campus (including two operas) and 30 on the professional stage, published 12 books on acting and theatre, written new plays, and translated classic ones. A renowned teacher of acting, directing, and dramatic literature, he has been a mentor to countless actors-in-training and continues to be an inspiration to students, alumni, and colleagues.

Eli Simon, Chair of the Drama Department, states, without hyperbole, that Cohen’s continuing influence on UCI Drama is such that faculty and students “align ourselves around him, taking solace every day in the knowledge that his unfettered brilliance as a director, writer, and teacher of acting positively affects everyone in our theatrical universe.”

Cohen was inspired toward a life in the theatre by courses in Shakespeare and English literature in high school. He began his university career as a political science major, but realized just before his senior year at UC Berkeley that drama

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was his true passion. Completing the requirements for both degrees in that final year, he graduated with a double major. A lifetime pattern of prodigious accomplishment was thus established.

He next earned a Doctor of Fine Arts degree from the Yale Drama School and found time to study at the Actors Studio in New York under the legendary Lee Strasberg. At that point he realized that his ambition was to teach in a university setting. He turned down an offer from UC Berkeley to accept a faculty position at the fledgling UCI, “figuring that at a new campus I would be able to create my own working environment.”

Not a single professional theatre company existed in Southern California when Cohen arrived on the scene in 1965. South Coast Repertory was an amateur theatre that had just been launched in Newport Beach; he joined as one of the earliest members. In the ensuing four decades, regional theatre has exploded in both popularity and significance throughout the United States, and Robert Cohen has been an important catalyst on the Southern California scene and beyond.

*Stage to Stage* focuses on Robert Cohen’s productions at UCI. He began with Tennessee Williams’ *Night of the Iguana* in 1966 and has since brought to life the timeless works of Shakespeare, Molière, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Bertolt Brecht, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Lerner and Loewe, Giraudoux, Sophocles, and many others.

The exhibit illustrates his accomplishments as author, director, playwright, translator, teacher, and actor, drawing from the production books he meticulously compiled over the years to preserve programs, annotated scripts, photographs, press releases, cast lists, rehearsal notes and schedules, theatre ground plans, published reviews, costume sketches, and much else, all of which serve to document his directorial record. Captions indicate the year that each play was produced at UCI.



# The Theatrical Work of Robert Cohen

Most materials on exhibit are from these production books in the Robert Cohen Papers, which he donated to Special Collections and Archives in 2006. Some photographs were loaned by Professor Cohen; selected photographs and posters are from the publicity archives of the Claire Trevor School of the Arts.

*Stage to Stage* was curated by Jackie Dooley, Head of Special Collections and Archives in the UCI Libraries. She acknowledges the quotations and other source material taken from the oral history interview that Professor Emeritus Spencer Olin conducted with Professor Cohen in 2006 as part of the UCI Historical Records Project.

# Portraits

Laurencine Lot, photographer. "Robert Cohen." Color photograph, 2007.

Ansel Adams, photographer. "Robert Cohen directing a drama rehearsal in UCI's Aldrich Park." Black-and-white photograph, 1966. Contemporary print from original negative by Ansel Adams, UCR/California Museum of Photography, Sweeney/Rubin Ansel Adams FIAT LUX Collection, University of California, Riverside.

# Author

Selected books on acting and theatre by Robert Cohen, 1968-2008.

Robert Cohen is the author of 12 books on acting technique and other theatrical topics. It is rare for a practicing theatre professional also to gain fame as a prolific author, let alone in the multiple roles of teacher, theorist, scholar, and critic. Cohen has done it all.

His doctoral dissertation, a scholarly analysis of the plays of the eminent 20th-century French dramatist Jean Giraudoux, was published as *Giraudoux: Three Faces of Destiny*. His first book, it established Cohen's scholarly credentials even before he came to UCI as an Assistant Professor and launched his multifaceted professional career in the theatre. *Theatre*, lavishly illustrated and published in eight editions, is Cohen's best-selling introduction to all aspects of theatre. Over the years he has also published two dramatic anthologies and a variety of scholarly articles in theatrical journals.

Most of his writing, however, focuses on the practice and theory of acting, forming a prolific record of his teaching philosophy that is available to teachers and students far beyond UCI. *Acting One*, published in five editions, has been the most-used acting textbook in the United States. He has now superseded it with *Acting One/Acting Two* (2008), his carefully integrated system of acting in both realistic and stylized plays, combining *Acting One* and *Advanced Acting*. *Acting Professionally: Raw Facts about Careers in Acting*, now in its 6th edition, is the most popular guide to professional acting careers. *Acting Professionally* is his seminal work on the theoretical underpinnings of contemporary acting; it is now in its sixth edition and has been translated into four languages. *Acting in Shakespeare* (two editions) codifies his perspectives on the challenges and opportunities that "the world's greatest dramatist" has presented to actors for centuries. All of these books remain in print.

# Director

His myriad accomplishments notwithstanding, Cohen considers himself primarily a director. His earliest effort was Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* at summer camp in 1957, the latest his UCI production of *Rabbit Hole* in 2007—and he shows no sign of slowing down.

He states “I have no favorites” among his plays, but admits that he takes particular pride in certain shows (though the list gets longer the more he thinks about it). To cite just a few examples: his 1989 production of Shakespeare's tragic *King Lear* was judged by the *Los Angeles Times* as the best play staged anywhere in Southern California during that year—no small feat for an effort featuring student actors that was rated against all productions by professional companies. *The Plaie Called Corpus Christi*, presented in three parts between 1985 and 1987 and translated by Cohen, was a rare contemporary staging of a medieval passion play. In 2001 his original play *The Prince*, in which Cohen brings the notorious Renaissance nobleman Niccolò Machiavelli to life, was deemed “stirring” and “exciting” by a critic at the *Times*. Such reactions could be quoted about many of his productions over the years.

In addition to a feverish schedule at UCI—he has directed two productions in most seasons—Cohen has been active in professional theatre. His particular interest in Shakespeare is reflected by his frequent return to both the Colorado Shakespeare Festival and the Utah Shakespearean Festival, where he will direct *The School for Wives* this summer.

Fulfilling a long-time dream, Cohen formed his own company in 2006: the UC Irvine Field Station at the Hayworth Theater in Los Angeles. The first production was *Machiavelli: The Art of Terror*, a revision of his original script *The Prince*, which had debuted at UCI in 2001.

*Night of the Iguana*, by Tennessee Williams. UCI production: 1967.

*Items shown:* Event program, one color photograph, one black-and-white photograph, published review.

*Oedipus Tyrannos*, by Sophocles. UCI production: 1967.

*Items shown:* Theodore Brunner letter to Robert Cohen regarding translation, three color photographs, production book showing ground plan and annotated script, published reviews.

*The Madwoman of Chailot*, by Jean Giraudoux. UCI production: 1969.

*Items shown:* Director's statement to audience regarding UCI shutdown due to campus unrest, black-and-white photographs on contact sheet, production book showing ground plan and annotated script.

*Othello*, by William Shakespeare. UCI production: 1971.

*Items shown:* Program, two black-and-white photographs, production book showing stage ground plan and annotated script.

*The Plaie Called Corpus Christi*, by an anonymous medieval author. UCI productions, parts I-III: 1985-1987.

*Items shown:* Event programs for parts I-II (1985-1986), souvenir program describing Cohen's translation and the production, one black-and-white photograph.

*King Lear*, by William Shakespeare. UCI production: 1989.

*Items shown:* Event program, two black-and-white photographs, production book showing *LA Times* drama critic's "best play of the year" ranking.

# Director

*Rabbit Hole*, by David Lindsay-Abaire. UCI production: 2007.

*Items shown:* Computer graphics color rendering of set design, production technical schedule, one black-and-white photograph, costume research photo sheet.

*Oklahoma!* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. UCI production: 1999.

*Items shown:* Event program, two color photographs, production book showing color rendering of set design and annotated script.

*Timon of Athens*, by William Shakespeare. UCI production: 2005.

*Items shown:* Production summary statement, two black-and-white photographs, photographs of costume fittings for the male lead.

# Posters

This chronological progression of posters advertising sixteen of Robert Cohen's stage productions at UCI depicts not only a sense of each play, but also reveals a gradual shift in graphic style over time.

1966. *Night of the Iguana* by Tennessee Williams.

1966. *A Midsummer's Night Dream* by William Shakespeare.

1968. *The Good Woman of Sezuan* by Bertolt Brecht.

1972. *Ondine* by Jean Giraudoux, translated by Robert Cohen.

1973. *After the Fall* by Henry Miller.

1975. *Misalliance* by George Bernard Shaw.

1977. *Lady in the Dark* by Moss Hart, Ira Gershwin, and Kurt Weill.

1978. *Richard III* by William Shakespeare.

1980. *Equus* by Peter Shaffer.

1982. *Sweeney Todd* by Stephen Sondheim.

1985. *The Plaie Called Corpus Christi, Part I.*

1986. *The Plaie Called Corpus Christi, Part II.*

1987. *The Plaie Called Corpus Christi, Part III.*

1989. *The Magic Flute* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

1997. *The Misanthrope* by Jean Baptiste Molière, translated by Robert Cohen.

2001. *The Prince* by Robert Cohen.

# Actor

While Cohen does not consider himself an actor, he has played numerous roles over the years— beginning with a comedic part in a high school play. These photographs depict some of his characters in plays ranging from *Waiting for Godot* in 1954 to *N. Towne Passion* in 1990.

As Pozzo in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, 1954.

As the Fool in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, 1961.

As Boyet in William Shakespeare's *Love's Labor Lost*, 1961.

As Morton in William Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 2*, 1961.

As the Policeman in Carl Ritchie's *The Thieves' Ballad*, 1962.

As Paul/Hortensio in Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*, 1964.

As Marat in Peter Shaffer's *Marat Sade*, 1967.

As George in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, 1971.

As the Narrator in the dance piece *Disjunctive Conglomerate*, choreographed by Janice Plastino and James Penrod, 1971.

As Alfred Doolittle in Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*, 1975.

As Judas in the anonymous *N. Towne Passion*, 1990.



# Playwright

Cohen's three original plays further demonstrate his versatility.

His first was *The Death of Morris Biederman*, produced at UCI in 1967, in which Cohen explored how traditional Jewish values can survive in the age of what his protagonist terms the “information implosion,” and in the world of sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

This was followed by *The Möbius Strip* in 1971, in which Cohen depicted gay-straight relations in an East Coast family, years before the “gay liberation” movement made the topic an obvious one for dramatic treatment. The *Los Angeles Times* called it “obscenely perceptive.”

Thirty years passed before his third authorial effort. *The Prince* is Cohen's take on Niccolò Machiavelli, the 15th-century Italian nobleman renowned for his treatise of the same title that describes how a ruler can most effectively retain and exploit power.

*The Death of Morris Biederman*, by Robert Cohen. UCI production: 1967.

*Items shown:* Event program, production book showing annotated script.

*The Möbius Strip*, by Robert Cohen. UCI production: 1971.

*Items shown:* Event program, one black-and-white photograph, production book showing published review in the *New University*.

*The Prince*, by Robert Cohen. UCI production: 2001.

*Items shown:* Published script, two color photographs, published review.

# Translator

Cohen has been a prolific translator over the years, bravely tackling the works of several eminent dramatic authors. He prepared translations of the librettos from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1989, with Lorna Cohen) and Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (1999) in order to produce them in English for UCI's stage. He confronted the challenge of Molière's elegant French in his translations of *The Bourgeois Gentleman* and *The Misanthrope* in 1982 and 1997, respectively.

In the case of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, originally written in Norwegian, Cohen apparently felt that two languages were insufficiently challenging. His *Pedro Gynt*, adapted into a combination of English and Spanish and set in Mexico, was deemed "An ecstatic whirlwind ride" by one critic.

Most recently (2003), he translated Jean Verdun's contemporary work *Tibi's Law* from the French. The play, which has only two characters, is set in a rural African cemetery. The production in Hollywood was a *Los Angeles Times* "critic's pick."

*The Bourgeois Gentleman*, by Jean Baptiste Molière. UCI production: 1982.

*Items shown:* Published script, two black-and-white photographs, production book showing costume drawing with fabric swatch.

*The Magic Flute*, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. UCI production: 1989.

*Items shown:* One black-and-white photograph, production book showing ground plan and annotated script with music.

*Tibi's Law*, by Jean Verdun. Hollywood production: 2003.

*Items shown:* Two black-and-white photographs, color flyer.

# Teacher

Beyond his directorial accomplishments, Cohen is a passionate teacher of acting whose methodology is widely admired, and whose legacy can be found on stages throughout the world. His books on acting theory and practice are in wide use as textbooks, many of them released in multiple editions, some translated into other languages, and all still in print.

UCI's drama program has always been, in Cohen's words, "a training ground for pre-professional actors." During the first academic year, in winter 1966, he founded the Students' Repertory Theatre, which enabled twenty student actors—at the time, most of the drama majors at UCI—to work together as a repertory company, collaborating on a series of plays over the course of the season. Remarkably, this was the first repertory company established for an undergraduate acting program at any university in the United States. The group's name was changed to the Irvine Repertory Theatre for the 1968-1970 seasons, after which the cohort of acting majors became too numerous to continue the program. But Cohen's mission had been accomplished: the aura of professional training was clearly established. He and two other faculty members briefly revived the repertory approach in 1975.

Cohen's chief focus as a teacher during most of his career at UCI has been graduate acting, though in early years he also taught directing and dramatic literature. Having had no prior teaching experience, he studied existing methodologies and then developed his own approach centered on the question "How do you translate style into believability?" The success of his method is evidenced not only by the many successful graduates of UCI's program and the prominence of his textbooks, but by the many invitations he receives to teach acting workshops worldwide.

*Items shown:* Audition call card, poster, programs, fact sheet, press release, black-and-white photograph of students rehearsing outdoors, Division of Fine Arts 1966-1967 season flyer, published reviews, Cohen's essay on reasons for establishing a repertory theatre for student actors, silkscreened poster.



The primary objective of the UC Irvine Libraries Exhibits Program is to support the research and instructional missions of UCI by interpreting and publicizing the richness, diversity, and unique strengths of the resources of the UC Irvine Libraries.

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